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SUBJECT: DEPUTY SECRETARY STEINBERG'S JANUARY 12, 2010 MEETING WITH COLOMBIAN PRESIDENT URIBE

REF: 09 BOGOTA 2714

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (U) January 12, 2010; 10:00 AM; Monteria, Colombia.

¶2. (U) Participants:

U.S.

Deputy Secretary Steinberg

Ambassador William Brownfield

DAS Christopher McMullen, WHA

DCM Brian Nichols

USAID Mission Director Ken Yamashita

Political Counselor Mark Wells (notetaker)

NAS Director Dan Foote

Economic Counselor Tim Stater

D(S) Special Assistant Lourdes Cue

Control Officer Marcos Mandojana

COLOMBIA

President Alvaro Uribe

Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez

Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva

Minister of Commerce, Industry & Tourism Luis Guillermo Plata

Ambassador to the United States Carolina Barco

Accion Social (GOC development agency) Director Diego Molano

High Commissioner for Peace and Reintegration Frank Pearl

Vice Minister of Defense Jorge Mario Eastman

MFA North America Desk Adriana Maldonado (notetaker)

¶3. (C) SUMMARY: Deputy Secretary Steinberg met with President Uribe and his key ministers for nearly three hours, discussing a range of bilateral and regional issues. Uribe detailed the advances in security, education, economic and social indicators, and trade during his administration but said that Colombia could not finish the job without continued strong U.S. support. He hoped to bring an end to the armed conflict in Colombia through demobilization and social programs, but judged that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) would never negotiate as long as it enjoyed a safe haven in Venezuela coupled with a steady income from drug trafficking. Deputy Steinberg reassured Uribe that U.S. counter-narcotics efforts would remain a core element of assistance, noting that it was essential to address Colombia's broader problems. Uribe agreed on the need for prudence in dealing with the bellicose statements of President Hugo Chavez but asked for intelligence-sharing on Colombian terrorist groups hiding-out in Venezuela. Uribe said that coca cultivation results in the destruction of Colombian rainforests and thus climate change, and sought support for his Forest Ranger Family program to protect rainforests. The Deputy noted concerns about impunity and

human rights. He reiterated U.S. support for moving forward with the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) at an appropriate time, and urged continued work on sensitive labor issues for when the U.S. Congress is ready to vote. END SUMMARY.

Ending the Conflict

¶4. (C) After a 20-minute one-on-one meeting with President Uribe, the Deputy Secretary opened the larger meeting by praising the "great partnership" between the United States and Colombia. He cited Plan Colombia's "positive but incomplete" results, calling for more effort to consolidate Colombia's security gains through reduced poverty and more equitable income distribution. The Deputy asked Uribe his views for ending the 45-year-old conflict with the FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN).

¶5. (C) Uribe recounted his and his predecessors' attempts to initiate peace processes with both terrorist organizations. He cited the GOC's success in facilitating the demobilization of more than 52,000 guerrillas and paramilitaries during his presidency. He outlined the GOC's poverty-reduction and land restitution programs aimed at increasing social cohesion and thereby undermining the terrorists' appeal. Uribe lamented that the Constitution of 1991 prohibited amnesty for perpetrators of crimes against humanity, which he claimed greatly restricted the GOC's ability to negotiate a peace agreement like that reached with M-19 in the late 1980s. He also lamented that the GOC had failed to prevent the assassination of the Governor of Caqueta by the FARC in December.

¶6. (C) Uribe concluded that the FARC and ELN's willingness to talk were hampered by the fountain of wealth from narco-trafficking

(which makes them self-sufficient, unlike the past conflict in El Salvador) and the prospect of safe haven in Venezuela. Uribe said Chavez' support of the guerrillas had frustrated further GOC military progress against them. The President accepted that U.S. security assistance had decreased in recent years, but urged the United States not to back down in what was a "winnable battle." Deputy Steinberg reassured Uribe that U.S. counter-narcotics efforts would remain a core element of assistance, noting that it was essential to address Colombia's broader problems.

Paramilitaries & Reparations

¶ 7. (C) Deputy Steinberg asked how the GOC was addressing the growing threat of criminal groups whose membership includes former paramilitaries. Uribe said the state had successfully recovered the monopolies on justice and security once held by the paramilitary and guerrilla groups, noting significant reductions in terrorist attacks, murders and kidnappings. Commissioner Pearl downplayed the role of paramilitaries in emerging criminal groups, citing a Colombian National Police (CNP) estimate that former paramilitaries comprised just 12% of the new groups' memberships. Pearl explained that this means there is a recidivism rate of only 7.4% among the demobilized paramilitaries.

¶ 8. (C) Asked about the backlog of reparations for victims, Uribe declared that the most effective reparation was ending violence. Molano offered that the GOC budget for administrative reparations was increasing to \$150 million in 2010 and would benefit 15,000 of the 275,000 victims currently registered under the Justice and Peace Law (JPL). Uribe reported that the GOC had just made a decision to confiscate more assets from former paramilitaries for use in reparations.

Reducing Impunity

¶ 9. (C) Deputy Steinberg expressed concern over the persistently high rates of impunity, noting especially the release just days earlier of several soldiers accused of extrajudicial executions (EJEs, presenting murders by state security forces as deaths in combat). He also asked about a backlog of human rights cases waiting to be transferred from military to civilian courts. Uribe said the GOC had made the decision in 2005 to transfer automatically all human rights cases involving the military to the civilian justice system, where prosecutors decide whether to investigate the case further or refer it back to the military justice system. Minister of Defense Silva asserted that due to military reforms, EJE complaints had declined from 143 in 2006 to 2 in 2009, according to a leading Colombian NGO. While Uribe assured the Deputy Secretary of his commitment to eliminate EJEs, he also vowed to defend the military against "false allegations" of wrongdoing. The Deputy Secretary urged Colombia to follow through on the Universal Performance Review initiated in 2008 at the UN Human Rights Council as a means of developing international and domestic confidence in its commitment to human rights.

Working with Neighbors

¶10. (S/NF) Turning to Ecuador, the Deputy solicited ideas for how the United States could support further rapprochement between the two countries. Uribe raised the sensitivities caused by Ecuadorian legal indictments of former Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos and Colombian military commanders over the March 1, 2008, bombing of a FARC camp in Ecuador. Foreign Minister Bermudez said the GOC was trying to build confidence with Ecuador through social projects along the border. On Venezuela, Uribe advised "verbal prudence," publicly ignoring Chavez to minimize the justification for his attacks. Uribe cautioned, however, that Chavez was "dangerous" in that he might seek to distract attention from Venezuela's growing social and economic problems by fighting with Colombia. Uribe thanked the United States for sharing intelligence on the activities of terrorist groups in Venezuela and urged continued cooperation.

¶11. (C) The Deputy Secretary commended Colombia for building security partnerships with Mexico and others in the region (reftel). He viewed this type of cooperation as an alternative to Venezuela's ALBA agreement and called for more positive opportunities for working with other like-minded countries in the region. He cited the Pathways to Prosperity initiative as a more hopeful model for cooperation.

Coca Cultivation & Climate Change

¶12. (SBU) Echoing his statements at the UN General Assembly and the Copenhagen climate change summit, President Uribe linked cocaine production and drug trafficking with deforestation. Replacing rainforest with coca crops harms the environment, and narco-trafficking is not only a problem for Colombia but for its neighbors as well. Uribe highlighted Colombia's "Family Forest Warden" program, which pays approximately 90,000 families not to cultivate coca and to supervise the recuperation of destroyed forest. The President suggested that a variation of the program could be launched with U.S. cooperation and become an essential tool for protecting Colombia's jungles and forests.

Free Trade Agreement

¶13. (C) Trade Minister Plata pressed the Deputy Secretary on passage of the FTA. He noted that several of Colombia's neighbors that produce the same types of products now enjoy FTAs (NAFTA, Chile, Peru) with the United States, placing Colombia at a disadvantage. Furthermore, he said non-passage of the U.S.-Colombia FTA had blocked completion of FTAs with Canada and the European Union because others were waiting to see how the sensitive labor and human rights issues would be resolved. Plata argued that the embargo imposed by Venezuela had already caused a 30% drop in Colombian exports in 2009 and would probably deepen to 50% in 2010. He concluded that Colombia cannot win with soldiers alone; Colombia needs economic opportunities to advance. Uribe added that many investors are awaiting FTA approval before committing to Colombia. He said in past years Colombia could afford to wait on the additional economic activity that the FTA would generate given the GOC budget surplus. He lamented that Colombia would have "much narrower fiscal room" in 2010.

¶14. (C) Deputy Steinberg responded that President Obama and the Secretary were aware of the need to pass the FTA, and further explained the problems posed by the U.S. Congress' legislative calendar and elections cycle. He noted that health care reform has taken longer than expected. He urged the GOC to continue working with the USG on labor violence issues and working conditions to "have everything lined up" when Congress is prepared to take up the FTA. He acknowledged that the goal should not be unanimous support, but that both governments must present the best case possible to maximize the chance for success.

¶15. (U) Deputy Secretary Steinberg cleared this cable.
BROWNFIELD